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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature on strategies used by students to learn a second language suggests that the research can offer important insights into teaching learners who do not naturally arrive at successful learning strategies. Raising students' consciousness to the options for language learning is seen as crucial. It is also proposed that learner training involves a shift from the view that the teacher and the method are responsible for learner success to a perspective that focuses on the learner's ultimate responsibility for a successful learning experience. Examples of strategies used successfully for attending, speaking, vocabulary learning, reading, and writing are cited as evidence that research has just begun to identify what learners actually do during the learning process. It is concluded that it is not yet clear how generalizable such strategies are in the face of individual student differences, nor how learners should be trained to learn. (MSE)

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Strategies in Target-Language Learning:

Insights from Research[1]

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How many times does a teacher exclaim, "Why, we already covered that in class!" or "But you learned that last Friday!"? Indeed, the teacher may in fact teach a number of things that are not learned by the students, or at least not learned in the way that the teacher envisioned. The teacher may have a certain agenda and the student an entirely different one. In other words, the content of instruction or teaching methods may be inappropriate for certain learners, depending on their level of language development and their individual learning styles. In the last few years it has become more and more evident that teachers need to look more to the learners themselves to gain insights as to the language learning process -- for example, to find out more about what is learned from what is taught, and how it is learned.

If we accept the claim that much of the mastery that a learner gains in a second language accrues through an unconscious process of acquisition (Krashen 1982), and is not the result of conscious learning, then we need not worry so much about what kind of conscious learning the learner indulges in. If, however, we view conscious learning as having a significant role to play, then the insights we can gain from successful second language learners have value in enhancing the learning of the less successful learners. This paper takes the view that there is a substantial contribution that conscious language learning on the part of the student can make in the development of second-language skills. The teacher is considered to have an important role in this endeavor as facilitator of learning.

In the last decade, the interest in improving conscious second language learning has increased so dramatically that there is now an identifiable movement in the direction of learner training. At one time, a teacher here or there may have devoted an hour or two at the start of a course to discussing how students could improve their learning patterns in the course. Now, entire training programs exist expressly for this purpose (see, for example, Rubin and Thompson 1982, Stewner-Manzanares, G., Chamot, A.V., O'Malley, J.M., Kupper, L., & Russo, R.P. 1983, Wenden & Rubin 1987, Helmore 1987, Grala, Oxford, & Schleppegrell 1987, Dickinson 1987, Willing 1989, Oxford 1990, O'Malley & Chamot 1990).

One major aim of learner training is to ensure that average learners do not waste their valuable time while in language courses, simply because they do not know how to go about learning effectively. We have all heard testimonials from erstwhile language learners about how they spent two or three years in a foreign language classroom and do not remember a word of the language. This phenomenon happens repeatedly. What this means on a practical level, for example, is that potential learners may not attend adequately to the input that they are exposed to in class. When opportunities to speak arise, they may not enlist the strategies for speaking that are available to them. Furthermore, even though they may recognize vocabulary to be a key to success in language learning, they let new words slip through their grasp through lack of an effective means to hold onto these words. They also may become frustrated with attempts

to read if, in fact, they do not know how to go about it successfully. Finally, when asked to write, they may do so with greater effort than necessary and with poorer results.

We might expect that learners who are good readers or writers in their native language would likewise be successful at these skills in a second language. To some extent this is the case, but not exclusively. The fact is that second language learners, particularly those with less proficiency in the second language, seem to forget the successful strategies they employ in their first language when faced with second language tasks. If they become more mindful of what they are doing and of how this may contribute to their success, their results as learners may be more satisfactory.

What is called for, then, is consciousness raising on the part of learners, and such consciousness-raising calls for a shift in attitude about the role of the language learner. Some learners may be used to assuming the attitude of the passive consumer: "Here I am, teacher. Come, do it to me. Teach me what you can about this language. If I don't learn, it's your fault." In an approach where the learner becomes aware of the learning process wherever possible, this learner also assumes a generally more active role in achieving success. Success is then no longer an accident, but the product of careful planning and execution of a series of strategies (i.e., conscious activities aimed at producing learning) that work for that learner.

In some cases, success may even result in cases where the particular teacher or teaching method is not naturally supportive of the ways that the given learners best achieve their goals. For example, learners who thrive on learning languages through meaningful communication may find themselves in a grammar-based approach with little opportunity for genuine communication. The challenge for them is then to supplement the classroom lessons with communication outside of class with native speakers or advanced learners, or find ways of encouraging the teacher to introduce more communicative activities into the classroom. Learners could also create utterances that they really want to say from the homework exercises, and check with the teacher as to the appropriateness of those utterances.

Language strategy research as demonstrated that there is no one best way to be a successful learner. Rather, each successful learner has a distinct set of strategies, but usually there is substantial overlap from one good learner to another. The insights to be discussed below are derived from research with language learners. Such research has entailed more than simply sitting in a classroom and watching learners perform. As a result of hours of such classroom observation, it has become clear that such an approach is not very revealing of learner strategies because many learners do not say revealing things in class, if they speak up at all.

Consequently, other approaches have been employed, such as having learners think aloud as they perform certain tasks, like reading a passage or writing an essay. Learners have also been asked to observe what they are doing and to report their observations, either introspectively (as soon as these events

took place) or retrospectively (after the events were over). The think-aloud approach is intended to get learners to provide unanalyzed, unedited insights into what they are doing. The self-observation method (introspection and retrospection) has the intention of involving the learner more in the analysis process (see, for example, Hosenfeld 1977, 1979, Cohen & Aphek 1981, Cohen & Hosenfeld 1981, Cohen 1984, 1987c). In all cases, the purpose has been to identify and describe the kinds of strategies that learners use to accomplish language learning tasks.

Let us now look at some of the strategies that learners have been observed using while attending in class, speaking, learning vocabulary, reading, and writing. These data are considered to be simply illustrative of the types of data available about what learners do and do not do in and out of the classroom.

Attending in the Classroom

An important reason for a learner to be in a language classroom is that the teacher and the other students as well are likely to provide language input that is comprehensible (Krashen 1982). Nevertheless, in order for the input to have maximum impact, the learners must be open to it. In reality, learners may find themselves exhibiting patterns of selective and only partial attention. For example, it is possible to attend only partially to well-practiced routines -- those that are more automatic, such as certain types of drills or reading aloud. The teacher may consequently get the false impression that the learner is engaged more fully than is actually the case. And in order to look good, students may purposely give the teacher the impression that they are engaged more fully than they really are. This may be done through continual nods of the head or eye contact. It may be done through asking questions now and again -- possibly even questions that the learner actually knows the answer to (as Bailey, 1980, reports doing). It may be done through counting ahead to find the line(s) that the learner will most likely be asked to read, so as to appear on top of the material when the time comes (Hosenfeld 1976).

Since it is easy to tune out in the classroom, the more successful learners sometimes employ attention-enhancing strategies. One such attention strategy during whole-class frontal lessons is that of responding silently to tasks asked of other students in the class -- instead of just waiting until it is their turn. Active listening and attending usually involves a continual search for the meaning in utterances as well. Good learners use a number of strategies in their search for meaning. For example, they make use of:

1. the knowledge that they have of the world.
2. their knowledge of the given topic.
3. their knowledge of expected utterances for the given context.
4. cues from prior utterances within the discourse.
5. cues from the stress that individual words have received.
6. their knowledge of the speaker, his/her tone of voice and body language.

The point is that good learners stay open to input, even if they do not understand everything. They are good observers of what is going on around them. When things are not clear, they may create interactions in which they can find out what they do not understand. For example, this may mean that learners raise their hand when something is not clear in order to obtain clarification. In smaller group interactions, there is more of an opportunity for them to do this.

In a one-on-one situation, it may mean that while having a native speaker tell them something, the learner may break in from time to time with a short summary of what they thought was said in order to check their comprehension. Research has shown, for example, that receiving input is not enough, but rather that there may need to be negotiation for meaning as well in order to make the incoming speech truly comprehensible (Long 1981). Now let us look at strategies for successful speaking.

Speaking

It has been suggested that there are two general groups of speakers in a target language -- the planners and the correctors. The planners prefer to carefully plan their utterance internally and given evidence of such behavior through a predominance of silent and filled pauses, while the correctors may exhibit little hesitation behavior and prefer to produce the utterance in whatever form it is in and work on perfecting it after it has been produced (Seliger 1980:89). Actually, individuals may do some of both. The point is that sometimes the planning and the execution are two separate phases, and sometimes they are integrated into one. Regardless of which approach a speaker uses, the task of producing an utterance is impressive, in that the speaker has to select and order elements, check on their agreement (e.g., in person, number, gender, tense) and pronunciation, and then produce the utterance in a comprehensible way with regard to rate of production, number and length of pauses, and so forth.

Successful speakers appear to be those who are willing to talk and to make errors. They are also likely to be more extroverted (Cohen 1977). What may not be so obvious is that they may not pay attention to error correction if it does not suit their purposes at hand. If, for example, they are concerned about communicating a message, it may be irrelevant to them at that moment that they have selected the wrong morphological form or the wrong lexical choice, as long as their interlocutor understood what they wanted to say. At another moment, this same speaker may be all ears to hearing and processing corrections. In fact, successful speakers may well request that they be corrected only once they are done talking, if at all. They are aware that many of their errors will clear up in the process of language development.

If, for instance, errors are a result of thinking in the native language and transferring that language's forms over to the target language, such errors will most likely decrease as the learner becomes more proficient in the second language. If the

errors are a result of making false generalizations within the language being learned, such errors will also clear up as the learner has more exposures to the variety of forms in the target language and to exceptions to rules. Part of successful speaking among learners is being able to make choices about what forms to use and how to use them, while not having these considerations be at the expense of communication. In other words, at times it may be necessary to compromise principles regarding the form of the message in order to convey the desired message.

Two studies would suggest that corrections of oral target-language utterances may not even be attended to at all -- or only ineffectively, and that even repeated and blatant corrections may not "take." Alamari (1982), for example, looked at the way in which 26 advanced adult Hebrew second-language learners in four classrooms related to their teacher's oral correction. She recorded each instance in which a learner was corrected, and then approached the learners at the break in order to ask them what they did when their oral language was corrected in class. Although all the learners said that they wanted to be corrected and almost all said they took teacher corrections seriously, about 20% reported not paying attention to the corrections and only 15% said that they wrote down the correction in their notebooks. Mostly, they reported repeating the correction to themselves. Such behavior would provide ample opportunity for forgetting the correction altogether.

Rosenstein (1982) conducted an interventionist study as teacher of a 100-hour university EFL course in spoken English. He collected two-minute segments of spoken language from each student in each of six class sessions (12 minutes in all) as a pretest and then another twelve minutes of speech as a posttest. An analysis of the transcriptions of the pretest allowed the teacher/investigator to assign all learners an overt error as their "public error" in need of eradication. He also assigned each learner a covert or "secret" error, one that they did not know about. He made sure that this covert error was another student's overt error in order to see if learners would learn from overhearing another student corrected on "their" error. The learners were corrected repeatedly on their overt error.

Of the eight students for whom he had complete data, two showed significant improvement in their public error and one in her secret error at the end of the semester. Another two students showed improvement in their public error and one student in her secret error, but these findings were not at a level of statistical significance. The others showed modest or no improvement in their public and secret error. Rosenstein credited the level of success attained to his general discussions with the learners as to why they made errors, individual discussions with them about their particular public error and explanations for it, written assignments regarding the error, and immediate correction of the public error when occurring in speech. Yet his success was still only about 50% for public errors and perhaps 20% for secret errors.

The reason why at least half the students managed to emerge from the treatment with little or no improvement can perhaps best

be found in the Alamari study: the learners simply were not paying attention to the corrections, not paying attention well enough, or paying attention but not efficiently recording the feedback that they received for future reference.

Successful second-language speakers use a variety of compensatory strategies to keep the conversation going (see Faerch & Kasper 1983; Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman 1984; Poulisse 1989).[2] For example, speakers may avoid certain topics that they do not yet feel they have the vocabulary to discuss. Of, if they do not know how to say something one way, they may use a paraphrase rather than remaining silent. In addition, they may utilize their interlocutor to provide assistance each time their knowledge falters (Tarone, Cohen, & Dumas 1976, Tarone 1981).

These appeals for assistance may not, in fact, be strategies for learning, but rather solely ploys for communicating. In other words, a listener may be prompted to provide the learner with a word or two along the way, and the learner may make no effort to learn that word. The appeal is simply to make sure that the listener was following and to keep the conversation going. This in turn provides the learner with more input from which to benefit in the learning process. Learners who encourage input have been referred to as "high input generators" (Seliger 1983). There are times, of course, when the speaker may well make an effort to learn a word that is supplied -- when there is time for processing the word, interest, a focus on new forms, and adequate knowledge so as to know what to do with the form. A frontal lesson may provide more time for processing a word than a small-group session or one-on-one in that the learner is likely to be engaged in conversation for a shorter period of time, allowing for more time for processing the input that has been generated. The issue of processing words brings us to our next topic which is what learners do with new vocabulary.

Vocabulary Learning

The learning of vocabulary in a second language is an area in which strategies have been seen to have a useful role. The number of unknown words always seems to outweigh the number of known words, and for learners without good rote memories, the task can seem at times insurmountable. It would appear that under any circumstances, learners do some screening out of vocabulary upon contact with the words (Cohen & Aphek 1979). In explaining this process of elimination, Levenston (1979) draws on empirical evidence to suggest that learners may prefer to deal with new words that are:

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[2] Compensatory strategies include strategies based on the native language (borrowing, literal translation, foreignizing), those based on the target-language (use of a general word, approximation, description, word coinage, mime, appeal for assistance, word abandonment), and discourse planning strategies (avoidance, topic avoidance).

1. easy to pronounce.
2. morphologically regular (i.e., without irregular inflections).
3. syntactically clear.
4. equivalent in meaning to words in the native language (or in some other language that the learner knows).
5. occurring frequently in speech or in writing.
6. generalizable to various contexts.
7. semantically simple (not having multiple meanings, particularly when such meanings seem unreasonable).

Once learners determine which words they wish to learn, the challenge is to decide how best to learn these. In the best of situations, the teacher will make the best possible use of background experience and teaching materials in order to provide the learner with a rich exposure to vocabulary. The approach to vocabulary learning that favors natural acquisition or automatic learning would suggest that the learner need not make any special effort to learn vocabulary. The contention is that with meaningful exposure to words, these words will naturally become a part of the learner's language. Yet for those without much exposure to the language or those who need vocabulary quickly, it would seem that strategies are in order. In fact, language learners rely heavily on associations between the words that are being learned and something else. Often such associations are not systematic. It has been shown that systematic approaches to associating the words to be learned to some cognitive mediator yields beneficial results (Bellezza 1981, Levin 1981, Paivio & Desrochers 1981, Pressley, Levin, & Delaney 1982, Cohen 1987b).

Learner responses to a questionnaire (Cohen & Aphek 1979) indicated that at least the following types of associations were being used in second language learning:

1. noting the structure of part of the word (e.g., the root or an affix) or all of it.
2. linking the word to the sound of a word in the native language, to the sound of a word in the language being learned, or to the sound of a word in another language.
3. attending to the meaning of a part or several parts of the word.
4. creating a mental image of the word.
5. linking the word to the situation in which it appears.
6. placing the word in the topic group in which it belongs.
7. associating some physical sensation to the word.
8. visualizing the word in isolation or in a written context.

Learners often use combinations of these types of associations. Perhaps the most researched form of association for vocabulary learning is that of the keyword mnemonic. In this case, there is an acoustic link -- i.e., a native-language word or phrase that is similar in sound to part or all of the second-language word, and an imagery link -- an image of the keyword "interacting" with the native-language word or phrase (Atkinson

1975). The keyword technique thus involves combining associational types #1 and #7 from the above list. For example, in order to learn the Spanish word pato 'duck,' English-speaking learners are shown a picture of a duck with a pot on its head -- or the learners picture it themselves. When they are asked the meaning of pato, this evokes the keyword "pot," which in turn reevokes the image of the duck wearing the pot (Levin 1981).

If the word being learned is abstract, then it may be necessary to use a two-stage recall procedure. For example, in order to learn the Hebrew word for 'resentment,' tina, an English-speaking learner could select as the keyword "teenager" and envision a teenager washing the dishes resentfully. Then when given the word tina, the learner has to make the acoustic link to "teenager" and then is to call up the image of the resentful teenager washing dishes. The mnemonic keyword approach is perhaps the most rigorous of the associative methods for vocabulary learning, but for this reason it is seen as the most powerful in that it provides a convenient "hook" for retrieving words from memory, namely, the keyword.

Many learners feel that vocabulary is the key to success. Yet many of these same learners do not make systematic use of strategies for learning, storing, and retrieving words. In other words, they may occasionally make use of a mnemonic keyword, but not systematically. Ironically, some learners even comment that they have so many words to learn that they do not have time to play around with mnemonics tricks for learning these words. The truth is, however, that use of mnemonics can enable the learner to memorize necessary routines (such as sets of vocabulary) more effectively so that the mind can be freed to spend on tasks requiring understanding and reasoning (Levin 1981).

Let us now move on to two other skill areas for which successful strategies have been seen to play a dramatic role, namely in reading and in writing a second language.

Reading

In the field of second-language reading, we have discovered that potentially good readers may not realize their potential simply because they neglect to utilize productive reading strategies. Hosenfeld (1979), for example, described the case of a ninth-grade English-speaking student of French who demonstrated poor reading skills until she became aware of strategies that she could benefit from using. This nonnative reader studied a list of strategies that good readers have been found to use, and she selected from that list those strategies that she did not use but that she suspected would improve her reading. She tried them out in her own reading and the improvement was dramatic.

The following are some of the strategies that good second-language readers are likely to use to a lesser or greater extent as they read:

1. clarifying their purpose for reading the material at hand.
2. looking for how the reading material is organized.
3. distinguishing important points from trivia.

4. jumping around in order to get a good sense of where the piece is going.
5. reading for meaning -- using as fully as possible their world knowledge, their knowledge of the particular subject matter, and their knowledge of linguistics.
6. reading in broad phrases (not word-for-word).
7. relying on contextual clues (preceding and following context), vocabulary analysis, and grammar to interpret unknown words, rather than referring all the time to the dictionary or a glossary.
8. keeping the previous material in mind while moving on to new material, and make ongoing summaries of what was read.
9. making predictions regarding what the next portion of text will be about.
10. looking for markers of cohesion (i.e., connectives, pronominal reference, lexical repetition or substitution, and the like).

If good readers become aware that they have failed to comprehend something, then they usually take corrective action. How this is done depends on the individual reader. Some readers may at this point look more carefully at certain vocabulary words -- perhaps ones that they skipped over during the first reading. Other readers may scrutinize one or more syntactic structures involved. Others may review the basic organization of the piece again. Some may do all of these, plus other things as well. Again, as with other skill areas, what the learners do in the way of monitoring their comprehension is less important than the very fact that they are engaged in comprehension monitoring (see Brown 1980 for more on comprehension monitoring).

Writing

Let us now briefly look at effective strategies that language learners use in the process of writing. Second-language researchers have begun to look at this process both through students' reporting about their composing and through concurrent videotaping of the writing itself (Zamel 1983, Jones 1983, Raimes 1987). The picture that emerges is similar to that of reading in that the product is unquestionably influenced by the strategies used in producing it. The better second-language writers seem to have better control over these strategies.

Perhaps the most basic of these strategies is to know how to juggle successfully high-, middle-, and low-level goals, and how to shift from one level to the other during the writing process. The high-level goals concern the basic direction of the writing, the general organization of ideas, and so forth. The middle-level goals relate to the realization of this direction, of these ideas, through definition, explanation, illustration, or whatever. The low-level goals relate to the form of the writing -- lexical choice, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and so forth. The better writers are able to tolerate dissonance at one level while functioning at another. For example, they are able to postpone editing for grammar and spelling while they are getting

their ideas on paper. If they do not know a word in the target language, they might jot down the native language word or an estimate of the target language word, with a mark indicating that this needs to be checked later. The main point is that they make sure that they get their ideas down on paper first.

The following are some of the other things that good second-language writers report doing:

1. engaging in retrospective structuring -- i.e., going back to go forward (which would mean, for example, reading over the last several sentences before proceeding ahead with any more writing).
2. repeating key words and phrases, using parallel structures, selecting conjunctions and pronominal reference carefully -- all to promote cohesion in the writing (i.e., the glue that holds the ideas together).
3. writing multiple drafts.

The process of retrospective structuring (e.g., reading the last two sentences over before continuing to write) has been found to contribute to the cohesion of the piece. If the poorer writers see their task as that of plugging along, churning out word after word in a linear fashion, then their product will be an artifact of such a process. Not only do better writers go back before going ahead, they also have a sense of how to conjoin material -- whether by subordination, coordination, or superordination -- and they use conjunctive phrases that are meaningful to them. They are aware that good writing is a process of exploration and of discovery, and that it is unlikely to result from one single draft, but only as a result of several drafts. Finally, it could be said that successful writers have an effective repertoire for processing teacher feedback in order to get the most out of it (Cohen 1987a).

Conclusions

This paper has drawn attention to the importance of looking at how learners go about the process of learning a second language. The claim has been made that insights accrued from this effort can have value in enhancing the learning experience of those learners who do not naturally arrive at successful learning strategies. It was pointed out that consciousness-raising is perhaps the crucial factor here. Since there may not be a single best way to learn given language material, awareness on the part of learners as to what does and does not work for them may be the most important thing. It was also noted that learner training involves a shift from the view that the teacher and the method are responsible for the learners' success to one which sees the learner as ultimately responsible for a successful learning experience.

This paper has provided examples of some strategies that research has shown to be successful in the skill areas of attending, speaking, vocabulary learning, reading, and writing. These examples are in many ways illustrative in that research has just begun to identify what learners actually do -- as opposed to

what teachers and the learners themselves might think they do. Furthermore, it is not clear yet how generalizable such strategies really are, given differences in learning styles from learner to learner. Finally, it is not clear how best to go about the process of training learners to be more effective learners, nor whether such training needs to be explicit, or whether it can be built into a curriculum more implicitly. It is clear that both teachers and learners can benefit from answers to these questions.

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